A.D. Carson
***i used to love to dream* (2020)**

How can the language of rap and hip hop supplement and even substitute traditional academic writing? How do musical composition and verse always already inform explorations of 'race, justice, identity, citizenship, history, home and humaneness'? What is the intellectual and political value of methodologically collapsing music-making and scholarly work?

In this LMYE Library, A.D. Carson explains how he came to the ground-breaking decision to publish his doctoral thesis in the form of an album, and details the work he undertook following that on his 'mixtap/e/ssay' *i used to love to dream* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020). Apart from opening up a space about the languages we use to write critically write about race and identity, Carson opens up a vertiginous conversation about modes of circulation of knowledge and the ontology of the written document.

A.D. Carson is an award-winning performance artist and educator from Decatur, Illinois, currently Assistant Professor of Hip Hop and the Global South at the University of Virginia. His work focuses on race, literature, history, rhetorics and performance.

[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE PROJECT'S TITLE?

The title of the album is *i used to love to dream*.

[00:00:25] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS PROJECT? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

My dissertation project is called *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions*. That album – well, it's an album that's a part of a digital archive – and that album is much longer than any of the other projects. It's 34 tracks. I believe it's over two hours' worth of music. But then, at the website, which is phd.aydeethegreat.com, you'll get – there's a blog, there is an introduction that I make by way of video kind of describing the project; and then you get kind of a written intro and some questions that I'm trying to answer; and then there are the lyric sheets, there's something about the composing process. There are also ways into the different conversations that I'm trying to answer, and then there is a timeline that starts with my first day on campus and ends with the end of my coursework. And then you get the playlist for the album.

And then I have a special section there for one of the songs from the album, called 'See the Stripes', that turned into this grassroots campaign that was attempting to get the university to acknowledge its very problematic history – well, not that the history is so problematic, it is, but more the acknowledgement or lack of acknowledgement of the university of that history and the ways that that might affect the present and the future of the university, and particularly, people's lives while living there as students, either undergraduates or graduates, professors, and people who live in the town.

And so, *Owning My Masters* was also, to my knowledge, unique in the same way that *i used to love to dream* is, because to that point, there hadn't been a rap album offered as a dissertation. And so, a lot of the conversation about the album or about the project is about the album itself, the 34 tracks, but there's much more than just the music that's there. I think the music is primary. For me, the music is primary. But if folks want other things to try to anchor it to the kinds of texts that they might have access to, or ways into, through, and out of; then, you could go to that to that website, where I have all of this information archived, and you can kind of dig into how what I'm thinking about in Clemson, and in South Carolina, and in the south east of the United States, relates to the rest of the country and how that relates to the rest of the world.

[00:03:34 to 00:04:00] A.D. Carson: Dissertation [Part 1: The Introduction] (YouTube)

After my dissertation album, *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions*, I moved

from South Carolina at Clemson University to Charlottesville, Virginia, and I didn't think that I was completely finished with the work that I intended to do with the dissertation album, because it was talking about a specific place in the American South, but it wasn't really addressing all of the United States or all of the American South – and moving from being a graduate student in South Carolina to being an assistant professor in Charlottesville was much different. And I felt very disoriented by that move. And so I immediately started working on a series – I didn't know it was going to be a series – but it started off with *Sleepwalking Vol. 1*, and then I recorded *Sleepwalking Vol. 2* the next year; and *i used to love to dream* is technically *Sleepwalking Vol. 3*, except that it's examining the kind of personal/interpersonal aspects of the phenomenon that I was thinking about when I moved from being a graduate student into the assistant professorship. And so there's a sequence from *Owning My Masters* to *Sleepwalking Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* to *i used to love to dream*.

[00:05:30] WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

So the album has many different topics, many different themes. Most of my work is about race, justice, identity, citizenship, history, home and humaneness. And so I think that you'll find all of those things spoken to in a multitude of ways over the course of the project. I mean, one of the things that I tend to latch onto in conversations about the work more publicly is about the ways that we tell stories about who we are, and I mean that on the personal/interpersonal and the larger like, even on the national level. And you know, it's kind of about how human beings articulate humaneness. And so you'll hear that, I think, in *i used to love to dream*, and you'll also hear the conflict that's presented in that when you listen to the archival film that I use to connect the tracks, because it sounds so vastly different from the voice that's backed by the beats that are made by the producers that I work with.

[00:06:58 to 00:10:43] Intermittent illustrative images from *Playtown USA* (1946)

The film is called *Playtown USA.* It comes from the 1940s. I believe it's 1946, and it's kind of like – the film is attempting to – I guess, describe the merits of publicly-funded recreational facilities. And it uses Decatur, Illinois, which is my hometown, as its case study for how having public recreational facilities would keep children from delinquency. And – well, of course, the Decatur Park District was something that, you know, me and my siblings – I mean, we definitely went to the parks and we enjoyed the free lunches, and we played basketball, and we did all of those things, but the Decatur of the 1940s is much different than the Decatur that we grew up in.

And what that film sonically speaks to is not – it's not the reality that we lived in. So, if it was anticipating a future, something happened between then, and when we came on the scene that – well, just changed drastically. And so if I were to pair a voice and background music to our experience of Decatur – like, being out in the streets of Decatur – it would sound much different than what that film presents as the public recreational facilities in Decatur. And I thought that that was a very productive way to listen to the kind of sonic signifying that a place does to indicate what it is to future generations. And since I am of the future generation that was kind of spoken into existence by that film, I wanted to kind of speak back to that film, and say: 'That's not what we were – or that's not what we became, even if it is what you're saying we were.'

And my strong suspicion is that it's also not what we were – or it's not all that we were, it's a representation of, like, an aspiration that folks had about what they believed the place was. And isn't that how history comes to us anyhow, is this aspirational thing, where someone writes what they hoped was the reality, so that we might move into a future that, like, where that comes true? And the question that's underlying there is: 'Who was written out of that history? Who do we not hear in that archival footage? Who do we not see in that archival footage?'

And because so many scenes from that film occurred just a couple blocks away from my grandmother's house, it's difficult for me to believe that Black folks weren't in Decatur then, or that their lives weren't being lived in Decatur during that time. But they definitely aren't represented in the way that I experienced them, and I assume, in the ways that my grandparents experienced them. And so, my question about that is: 'Why?' And I don't know, it felt very, very productive to me. And I

hope that what audiences realise is that I'm presenting both of these things, or presenting these different things so that you can understand that this is always contested, even if there's no one that you hear contesting it.

[00:11:05] WHAT DOES THE PROJECT CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

I think that what the project is contributing to the existing body of knowledge is a different form of attempting to do this work about race, justice, identity, citizenship, history, home and humaneness. It's not that rappers haven't been doing this before, but to have this kind of project exist in the context of an academic institution, going through the peer review process that the academy puts forward for what they consider valuable research is a substantial change. And I believe that that might be something that's perceived to be a significant contribution, even though, we understand if those institutions turned around and looked at other rap albums, then they would find that there are many other projects that might contribute in this very same way.

The impulse to make the contribution to academic knowledge in the form of an album came from the contributions that were made to my own academic journey by musicians, by albums that I listened to that, you know – I remember there's a Curren$y song that has a feature verse, I think from Mos Def and from Jay Electronica, and the Jay Electronica verse was so compelling to me. But what's really compelling about that verse is not really like the verse, it's this one moment, where he says – I think it's like: 'I pray this flow is dumb enough ugh / I pray my heart is DMC and Reverend Run enough', and the part that I was really, really interested in was the 'ugh'. And how do we – like, how do you get at what the 'ugh' in a particular rapped verse says, without, like, hearing that utterance. I can't really like – what does the 'ugh' say? What is that doing for me as a listener? And what is that contributing to, like, how does that punctuation, that aural punctuation, like, contribute to what I understand about what he's rapping in this song?

And I knew it did something. I couldn't describe it. And so, maybe I could try to recreate it, or maybe I could try to speak back to it. And so I remember writing this presentation that was all about, like, what the 'ugh' in a rap song says, and the different things that it might say. And I realised that talking about it is never going to be the same as rapping about it. It's never going to be the same. There's just nothing that's going to take the place of that.

And very often, when folks do what someone might call like an arts-based project, then they might be asked to write a 100 pages about that piece of art that they submit. And my response to that was: 'I wrote all the words I intended to write. And so you have that. And so if I were to write that thing about the project, then I will be submitting to you two different projects. I'm submitting the one project: I wrote what I wrote.'

And that was the challenge that I was issuing to the graduate school there. And this is also why when this project is cited by people, they'll look at what, essentially to me are liner notes that I submitted to the graduate school portal, and then they'll look at, say, maybe like the bibliography there or the text that's there, and that text doesn't really correspond to the text of the project, because the text of the project is all online as sound files. I did not convert them into words, and then put them into that portal.

So, if you don't go to the site, or if you don't go to anywhere where the project itself is archived, then you're not going to get the project, you're going to get something that alludes to the project, or something that gestures toward the project, but it's not actually the project. And I felt that that was a very important move for me to make, so that folks would really contend with the music that I made, rather than the words that I wrote about the music that I made.

[00:16:15] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT AND WHY?

The structure of the project is really interesting, because if you look on streaming platforms, or even in the ebook that's on the University of Michigan's website, you'll see that there are eight sound files.

But if you look on the vinyl album, or you look on the liner notes, you'll see that there are 14 tracks listed. The reason for that is because our digital streaming platforms – well, they exist in a different sphere than the one that I hope for my work to exist in, where the album is open access, and it's free for people to stream and download, whereas if I were to make those tracks – all 14 tracks – distinct, then someone might get one of those filler tracks that's just the audio from the archival film. And if they got that, they paid, you know, $1.29 for it, and they thought that they were getting a song, then they would probably be pretty upset, and I didn't want anyone to ever have that.

But I also wanted – there was a point in time, when I thought maybe I should just make the whole project one audio file, and it'll just be a 25-minute audio file, and then if someone were to download it, then they would just pay a $1.29 for the entire thing. But then that would make it difficult for a person to go to the specific place in the project to get, like, the part that they want to listen to or the part that they want to engage with. And so the form is interesting, because of the ways that we consume music, more than anything that I was doing compositionally – even though you hear the deliberate sequencing in the composition when you listen to the project.

So, the vinyl in my mind is the ideal listening experience, not because – and I do love the way the vinyl sounds – but it's ideal, primarily because it's the one that seems to correspond most closely to the way that I wrote the album for the experience of the listener. And the digital streaming platforms don't do that, primarily because of what I just said. So, you'll also see in different press releases – there are two different press releases – one says: eight tracks engaging with hip hop compositional practices or something along those lines. And then, there's another press release that says: 14 tracks, you know, doing whatever. And it's not because either of those are a lie, or more true than the other, but it really depends on the platform that you choose to engage the project. Also, the vinyl albums, there were only 100 printed. So, that's not going to be hopefully most people's experience of the album, because I imagine, I assume, I hope that more than 100 people listen to the project.

[00:19:38] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE PROJECT?

The project was incredibly difficult to write, and I believe that when people listen to it, that might be audible, because I was incredibly depressed, and I think that there's so much of our work in this sphere that we do, where we're supposed to, or we're expected to kind of remove our feelings from it. How we feel has very little to do with what we observe and what kinds of conclusions we arrive at in that data or engaging in that work. But that's not the case for someone who writes music, or it's not the case for me as a musician.

And so while I'm thinking about how so much of this journey that I'm on might be articulated as success, it feels really hollow, because I'm here alone; and the people I worked with, the people that I lived around, the people I love most, the people that I'm connected to, and maybe even speak with so much of the time, are hardly ever around when I'm celebrating these things that folks might consider markers of success. And so I even ask in the last song, 'Asterisk', you know: 'Is it really a win when your team ain't there? / Try to get you some sleep, but your dreams ain't there. / All you wanted was to make a little something out of nothing you was given, and you know it ain't enough to just be living.'

And when I'm asking that question, it's really kind of thinking about, like, whatever place that I might be, and then thinking like, you know, my brothers, my friends, are not able to enjoy this platform in this place, except for maybe following on Instagram or Twitter or whatever, social media platform, and that's not the same as being in the place. But also, when I'm in the place, who do I get to have those inside conversations with? Who do I get to joke with about it? Who do I get to share the memory of how absurd this room is, and how that absurdity is revealed by our presence in the room? And that absurdity feels much different when you're by yourself in that room. And I wanted to write that as well, because that's so important a part of the journey that I find myself on, and it's really important to try to describe that. But then, you don't have anybody to confirm whether your writing about it is accurate. So then you ask: 'Well, who do I connect with here?' Well, there aren't nearly as many people here, who I might connect with in the way that I connected with people from home.

So I'd say that the album, while it was therapeutic writing it, it's not therapy. And I imagine that my therapist would say that as well. But it's also the way that I've always managed this type of thing, whatever I was feeling, whether it was like the highest of highs or the lowest of lows, I've always written through those things. And so all of the things that I'm describing, and the things that I'm interested in as a scholar and as an artist, are filtered through the way that I'm feeling about my life at that moment. And that approach is a filter, I believe, that is over the entirety of the project.

And I think that there are some bright moments in there as well. And I'd say, like, maybe the brightest moment is when I do get to connect with one of those people that I previously worked with. You know, the track called 'ready' with Truth, where we're actually talking about what that journey was like for us. And that was written when he came here to Charlottesville and we had the opportunity to hang out for a day, because we were doing a listening session for the previous *Sleepwalking* project. And so I think that anyone who listens also can probably hear that moment of joy through whatever that dark moment might be, and that's very deliberate for me in the composition of the album, that folks can hear the range of emotion that's there as well.

[00:24:35] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS PROJECT?

It's really difficult to identify a favourite track, because I think that they're all so different and distinct from one another, and you know, all very deliberately chosen so that you do have this range.

But I guess, to speak to something that I found impactful, because I had to overcome quite a bit to record this particular piece, because of its content – it's called 'just in case'. And the reason it was difficult was because I wrote it initially when I lived in South Carolina, and it was about – well, it was a 'just in case letter' that I'd written to my family just in case something happened to me, if I were to be picked up by police officers and never came home. I wanted there to be a document that existed that said to them: 'I didn't harm myself. I didn't act out of character. If they're telling you that I did do this to myself, then please investigate, please ask more questions, please make sure someone is held accountable!'

And that seems to be an absurd kind of thing to write. Maybe it's particularly cruel to send something like that to my mother or my siblings that says: 'If I die, ask questions!', because then you're putting that into their minds, but at least from the year 2012 until present, we've had instance upon instance of this absurd situation becoming reality, and then people telling us that some young black person died of mysterious circumstances. And ultimately, the investigation either doesn't happen, or it ends with someone saying: 'Oh, well, they killed themselves', or: 'She died mysteriously, and we don't know what happened.' And this means that we have to live in the absurd circumstance of that possibility always, especially if you are doing work or if your life issues a challenge to those powers that be.

And because of the work that I was doing there, I felt it necessary to write that piece. And I also wanted to try to articulate that absurdity, even though of course the piece is written very sincerely. And so making that real for my family, making that real for my mother, making that real for my siblings, and for my pops, you know, and all of these people back home, but also, for the people who are around me, and for myself, was really – it was more difficult in South Carolina, that's the reason I didn't record it before now.

And I feel different now that I live in Charlottesville, but not much different. Different enough to record it and allow people to listen to it, but not so different that I believe that it's an impossibility now, because even right now, we're dealing with the reality that if I didn't mention a name, then we could just say: 'There's a case right now in this country or in other countries across the world, where some person mysteriously died, and it seems that it happened at the hands of folks who have the power to make something like this appear – quote unquote – mysterious, and no one's going to investigate. And there's a family that's really worried, because they know for certain that that's not what their family member did.' And it would correspond to that reality in that moment.

And so in a certain way, the content of that piece is tragically evergreen. And of course, my hope would be for this piece to be old, for it to be a thing that we used to do, for a way that people used to

have to articulate reality. But history tells us that that won't be the case, because even before 2012, we can go all the way back, in this country at least, to – well, we can just go back to the beginning. And, you know, that to me is maybe the true tragedy of it all.

[00:29:45 to 00:32:30] A.D. Carson (2020) 'just in case' from *i used to love to dream*, University of Michigan Press

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

Clips Summary

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